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Tähtinen, Jaana, Ryan, Annmarie and Holmlund, Maria, 2016, How to Develop Theory and Keep Our Jobs. The Role of Academic Gatherings in Our Theory Development Practice, *Marketing Theory*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 250-256. DOI:10.1177/1470593115608077

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HOW TO DEVELOP THEORY AND KEEP OUR JOBS? THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC ‘GATHERINGS’ IN OUR THEORY DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

Professor Jaana Tähtinen, Turku School of Economics, Pori Unit, Jaana.Tahtinen@utu.fi*

Lecturer Annmarie Ryan, University of Limerick, Annmarie.Ryan@ul.ie

Professor Maria Holmlund, HANKEN School of Economics, Maria.Holmlund-

Rytkonen@hanken.fi

* The corresponding author; Turku School of Economics, Pori Unit, P.O.Box 170, FI 28101 Pori, Finland

ABSTRACT

This special discussion article examines the roles that academic workshops play in the creation of a space to advance knowledge in marketing while also supporting academic career progression and production of impactful research. We draw upon the concept of Communities of Practice to understand the nature and variation of academic workshops and to highlight their role in advancing the discipline. From this, the invited contributions set out the varied forms through which workshops create safe spaces, atmospheres, both divergent and convergent thinking, time for exploration and joint working and support for publications. Our concluding discussion draws together insights regarding the importance of variation between workshops, while also being attentive to their common goals. This discussion shows that workshops are worthy of support and protection.

1 INTRODUCTION

Being a marketing scholar involves living with a number of tensions. Firstly, research and theory in marketing is fragmented, consisting of a large and ever growing variety of schools of thoughts (Lagrosen and Svensson, 2006; Seth, Gardner and Garret, 1988; Shaw and Jones, 2005), brands (Cova et al., 2009) or tribes (see Varey, 2010) with more or less clear boundaries arising within the discipline. These research tribes seem to emerge with little or limited cross-boundary interactions and to get smaller and increasingly specialised (Ramirez et al., 2013). Hence, in order to advance theory in marketing, researchers need to understand an increasing number of different approaches and try to form at least some conceptual linkages between them (Möller, 2006). The other alternative is to choose and dedicate to a particular tribe, and therefore to contribute to a single theoretical discussion. This choice of concentrating on a specific discussion might help researchers, but it also restricts their scholarly view on the theory of marketing. Hence, there is a tension of either becoming an expert in a discussion or a generalised scholar in theories of marketing.

Secondly, tensions arise also from the current pressures that marketing scholars are facing, especially for those that wish to be part of a ‘camp’ that contributes intellectually rather than a ‘camp’ that simply produces papers (i.e. ‘pulp and paper industry’) (see also Gummesson, 2010; Tadjewski, 2010). We need to be productive in these small tribes; where productivity is increasingly framed as producing as many internationally peer-reviewed articles as possible each year. This is because both the reputation and the funding of our department and our tenure, career, and salary are partly based on these numbers (Bakør et al., 2000). We are also assessed based on the impact of our studies, in how many high ranking ABS listed journals (Mingers and Willmott, 2013) we are able to publish and, occasionally, based on the number of studies actually referred to ours (Woodside, 2009). Any research assessment exercise takes up the impact of our study, be it for tenure or of the research group of which we are a part.

Thirdly, we are increasingly expected to conduct multi- or interdisciplinary research; to work in large research communities with national and international scholars representing different disciplines (Frost and Jean, 2003). However, although in principle, it would be perhaps relatively easy to find fellow researchers from other disciplines to work with, in practice, interdisciplinary research is a highly challenging task (Thurow et al., 1999). Researchers’ different disciplinary backgrounds result in different conceptual languages, even if the ontological, epistemological and methodological differences could be resolved or at least

understood. Publishing interdisciplinary research and getting rewarded for it is not free from challenges (Gonzales and Rincones, 2012). If research is judged using criteria outside the main research field, the disciplinary differences may play a stronger role than hoped. Despite these and other challenges (e.g. measuring the journal performance in multidisciplinary fields, Lee and Shin, 2014), multi- and interdisciplinary research may be the only way to solve wicked problems and hence deserves this effort.

Finally, researchers in marketing are sometimes expected to produce knowledge that can be used immediately in practice, to work akin to R&D departments. This stems from the calls of the funding agencies from where we are expected to raise external funding (Chival and Nossaman, 2014) to be able to conduct, write, present, and publish our research in a way in which practitioners can engage.

In facing these tensions, we pose the following questions. Can a researcher in marketing feel like a ‘true researcher’, be a free-thinking mind, enjoy the intellectual challenge, develop original multi- or interdisciplinary research, and really advance the theories in marketing? So far, academic conferences and symposia have been important sites for academic interaction and learning. However, these sites have changed, partly because of the pressures facing academia. For example, large conferences have been regarded as places of personal branding where the opportunities for collegial interaction are unevenly distributed (Funk et al., 2012; McCarthy et al., 2004). Hence, are we doomed to play the game and produce publications ‘quick and dirty’ (Tadajewski 2010; Willmott, 1993)?

In this special commentary discussion, we suggest that small academic workshops can help us resolve the tensions and trade-offs we face in our academic practice to concurrently retain our academic integrity and independence while at the same time attending to our career progression, producing impactful research, etc. The invited contributions that follow present a number of ‘solutions’, in various forms of smaller academic workshops, and gatherings, which suggest particular research practices that each in their own way have been designed and experienced as ‘pockets’ during which researchers cannot only enjoy being a researcher, but also tackle the pressures that otherwise could jeopardise the pleasure of academic researching and writing.

In order to frame the discussion, and add an element of analysis to accompany the description, we offer the concept of Communities of Practice (CoP), as one way to understand the nature of interaction within academic communities. We invited the contributors to consider their workshop as a community of practice or to offer an alternative, more fitting framing. When viewed holistically, CoP can help to frame the socialisation dimensions of academic

gatherings, including the development of a research identity, authenticity and legitimacy in the marketing academic community. But while this role is crucial, the CoP discussion also points to the importance of variation and creation of new knowledge.

2 ACADEMIC GATHERINGS AS COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The term community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 98) is defined as ‘a system of relationships between people, activities, and the world; developing with time, and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice’. A community of practice (CoP) is considered an informal group of people who have a shared interest and profession. They learn and share their experiences, expertise and enthusiasm with one another with a sense of belonging and communal commitment (Wenger and Snyder, 1999; Wenger et al., 2002).

Two readings of the CoP concept prevail within the extant literature. One, that it is primarily about socialisation into a pre-existing community (i.e. apprenticeship) and two, that it is more about different but linked professionals creating new knowledge, by a process of common problem solving and appropriation of tasks. Therefore, we ask how, a CoP, an academic workshop can act as both a device for socialisation and career advancement and as a space for new knowledge creation and theory development in marketing. In reviewing the literature on communities of practices, we identify particular characteristics that would enable these joint but not necessarily co-existing dimensions of a workshop. The three characteristics are: (1) opportunities for socialisation and development of social capital, (2) variation and heterogeneity in communal resources, and (3) opportunities for joint problem solving and appropriation of tasks. We discuss all three characteristics in more details below.

2.1 Opportunities for socialisation and development of social capital

The literature on community of practice acknowledges the tangible and intangible values of a CoP that can be created in multiple ways (Wenger et al., 2002). At an individual level, community practices help the member to access expertise and solve practical problems. Members can extend their skills and professions through learning and sharing. Due to a strong sense of passion for joint enterprises, members of the community will gain a sense of belonging and professional identity (Wenger et al., 2002). Central to this is the concept of newcomer learning, conceptualised as ‘legitimate peripheral participation’, which is a continuous, active,

engaged, situated and identity-forming process. The theme of 'from novice into fully formed member of a community of practice' is the dominant theme in the extant literature (Lee, 2005).

For an organisation, engagement with CoP can be considered as a 'knowledge-based alliance' (Wenger et al., 2002: 16). This knowledge may generate ideas that help to save on research and development costs and time, while at the same time gaining enhanced competence (Wenger and Snyder, 1999). This competence-enhancing view of communities of practice has found fruitful ground when studying academics as knowledge workers and how they develop from novices to members. For instance the CoP concept has been brought to bear to consider the emergence of early career academics into the fold of the academic community (Jawitz, 2007; Warhurst, 2008) or conversely as a way to discuss teacher identities and authenticity as educators (Kreber, 2010). Participation in academic workshops offers opportunities for socialisation into the discipline, by facilitating early career or newcomer researchers to join and eventually fully participate.

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) categorise types of memberships in a CoP as: (i) a core members group, (ii) a larger group of active members, and (iii) an even larger group of peripheral members. Thus, newcomers begin as peripheral members, and through active engagement with CoP activities, they move to the more active and core groups. This will involve them acquiring community-specific knowledge and learning to undertake more complex tasks within the community; for instance, taking on a role of discussant in a workshop or in time being invited to join the organising or scientific committee. Having a paper accepted to a workshop will be one key way for new comers to be recognised as legitimate peripheral members of the group. However, early activities where newcomers might passively observe the core group will be acceptable for only so long, eventually newcomers will be required to participate as active members.

Academic workshops, as a result of their smaller sizes, tend to activate the participants more than in larger conferences, and all the workshop participants might play several roles such as a presenter of a paper, discussant, and track chair. The foremost purpose is to enable regular gatherings where academics present and share research findings and obtain feedback on these from others. Meeting fellow researchers and building networks are other aims, also recruiting junior and senior faculty at some conferences. From a social capital development perspective, it may be necessary to consider for example, in what way do our academic workshops facilitate this socialisation? What specific practices are involved? How do the social structures within an academic gatherings shape, support, or hinder newcomers' participation? Is this role of workshops something that is being eroded (as we have seen in large scale

conferences) and therefore has to be protected? And beyond this role of socialisation and networking what other roles do our workshops perform at the higher level of development of theory within the sub-field?

2.2 Variation and heterogeneity in communal resources

Communities of practice should not be viewed as primordial culture shaping entities; thus ‘we assume that members have different interests, make diverse contributions to activity and hold varied viewpoints’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 98). However, this perspective can be overlooked and even confused with Wenger’s (1998: 72–84) notion of the sources of coherence in communities. While CoP members interact with one another, establish norms and relationships through mutual engagement, become bound together by an understanding of a sense of joint enterprise, and produce a shared repertoire of communal resources (for example, language, routines, artefacts and stories), they should not be confused with sub-cultures and does ‘not imply the necessary co-presence, well defined, identifiable group or socially visible boundaries’.

Does this characteristic serve as a kind of limit on viewing our academic workshops, and the communities they serve, as communities of practice? For instance, we are seeing a trend towards ever increasing specialised research tribes, with little or limited cross-boundary interactions (Ramirez et al., 2013). Can such tribes be therefore better described with recourse to sub-cultural qualities? For example, we could cite the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) group which has not only specialised texts, and special issues dedicated to the work, but also clear positioning papers such as the Arnould and Thompson’s (2005) highly cited piece which sets out a clear canon of what is and what is not considered CCT research. This fits with growing calls for coherence and singularity in research groups in terms of methodological approach or core concepts (Harvey et al., 2002). Should all gatherings of academic communities strive towards coherence and the development of clear ‘brand’ position and value proposition? Or is there room within such ‘coherent’ groups for variation in viewpoints?

According to Brown and Duguid (1991: 49) ‘looking only at canonical groups, whose configuration often conceals extremely influential interstitial communities will not provide a clear picture of how work or learning is actually organised and accomplished. It will only reflect the dominant assumptions of the organisational core’. However, for innovation and new knowledge development, researchers need to ask ‘different questions, by seeking different sorts of explanations, and by looking from different points of view, different answers emerge’ (ibid

p. 52). Can we therefore judge a workshop, as CoP, by how it fosters such divergent thinking? For example, in the creation of a safe space where different viewpoints are welcomed, where '[the community] encourages a willingness to share ideas, expose one's ignorance, ask difficult questions and listen carefully' (Wenger et al., 2002: 28). To what extent therefore can we say that our academic workshops create this safe space and even expose one's ignorance in order to generate rich discussion and dialogue? What kinds of practices might we engage in to support or hinder this form of open dialogue? And, is this always necessary?

2.3 Opportunities for joint problem solving and appropriation of tasks

An important dimension to CoPs is the offering of opportunities for appropriation of tasks in joint problem solving. According to Cox (2005), for Wegner (1998), part of the role of a CoP is to make 'work habitable' by enabling knowledge workers to appropriate tasks, and make them their own. For example, in a group of coders, faced with a new problem, getting together to solve it, and each bringing in lines of new code to jointly but iteratively solve the problem, thus demonstrating the social interactive dimension of situated learning (Roberts, 2006). How can workshops enable this level of joint enterprise? Is there room in the busy programmes of academic workshops to enable joint working or new collaborations to form? What other forms of joint working might be engendered and what might be the benefits for knowledge and/or theory development?

The CoP framing is being presented here as one way to conceive how learning and participation function within academic workshops. This framing is presented as an invitation to respond to this concept or offer alternative ways to express the functions of the workshops and their role in the practice of theory development in marketing. What follows then is a series of invited commentaries (5) presented, in alphabetical order of the workshop organisers, which aim to shed light on different variations of CoPs in the marketing discipline. We stress that we do not wish to argue that the practices presented in the commentaries are the best practices for everyone. Instead, we see that it is important to document these as examples of functioning CoPs in research, of which scholars may adapt and put into practice when organising such gatherings.

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Acknowledgements:

This work was supported by the Academy of Finland [grant number 251981, Jaana Tähtinen].